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With the Authors Compl^{ts}

THE
POTTER'S WHEEL,

EXHIBITED BY

SIR HENRY DOULTON.

Chevalier of the Legion of Honour, A.I.C.E., etc.

A few Notes on the Early History of
the Potter's Wheel.

BY

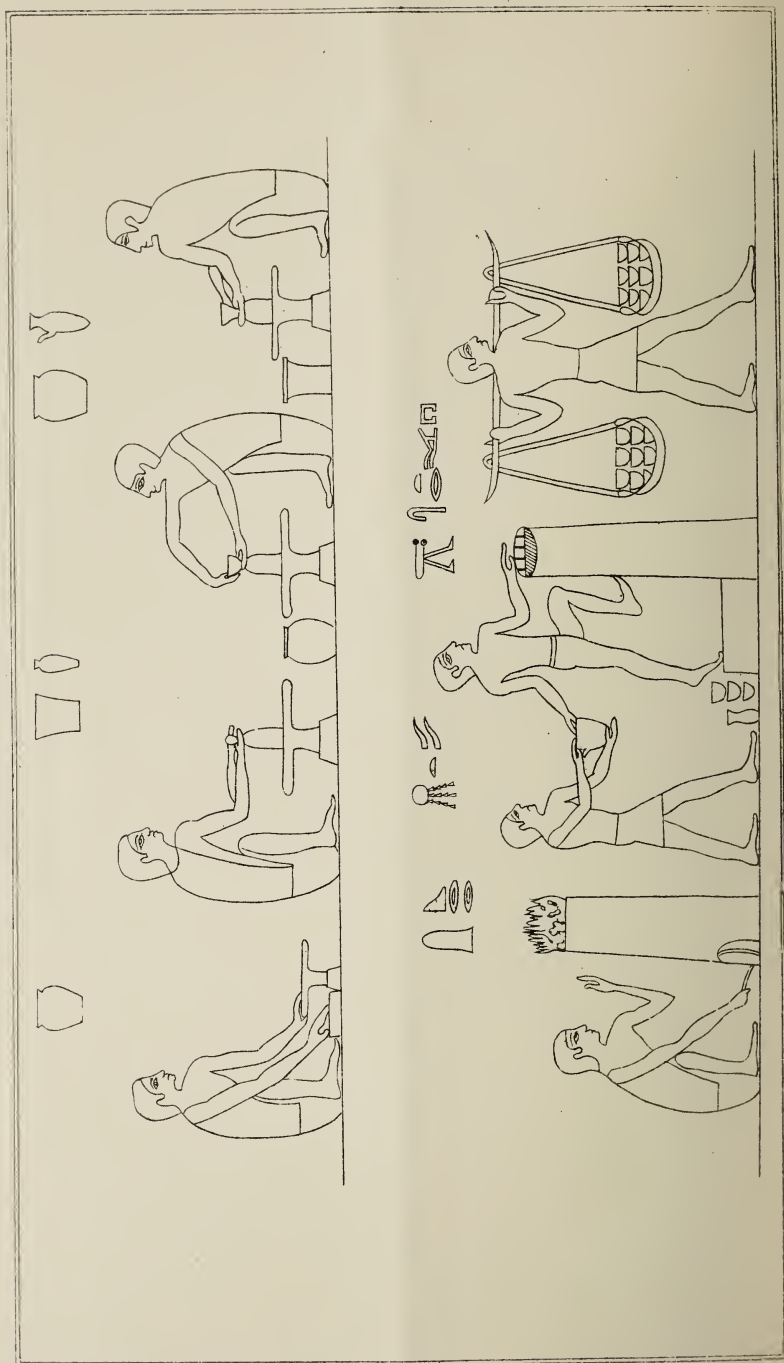
WALTER T. ROGERS, F.R.S.L.,

Sub-Librarian to the Hon. Society of the Inner Temple.

LONDON.

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24, CHANCERY LANE, AND 8, AGAR STREET, STRAND.

1888.



AN EGYPTIAN POTTERY
BENI HASSEN

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The Potter's Wheel.

THE art of making pottery is of the highest antiquity, and, as is amply testified by the great quantity of urns and other vessels found in the sepulchral barrows of Britain and other European countries, was practised by all the known prehistoric races. The *modus operandi* would seem to have been similar in all lands and at all times, with one exception, that the pottery of the Neolithic and other early ages was made by the hand alone without the aid of any mechanical appliance whatever. The smaller vessels indeed seem to have been formed by merely scooping out the centre of solid balls of clay ; many of the larger works, however, exhibit great skill on the part of the potter in building up their thin walls, some, indeed, have been found so neatly and perfectly formed as to have every appearance of " wheel-made " pottery.

After a time, as taste began to exercise a sway over human beings, men discovered that work done entirely by hand occupied a longer time, and was not so perfect when finished, as that done with the aid of

machinery ; whereupon, it is most probable that some ingenious workman potter set his wits to work, and saved his heels by his brain, by inventing a machine which should lighten his toil : since which time all pottery, with the exception of the rudest and most primitive sorts has been moulded, or as it is technically styled “ thrown ” by means of a very simple contrivance known as the Potter’s Wheel or lathe.

The name of the originator of the Potter’s Wheel, like that of numbers of other inventors, has been lost in the dim past, but many conjectures have been made on the subject. By some it was supposed to have been the invention of Anacharsis, but Strabo VII. p. 209 [compare also Seneca, *Epist*, 90], has shown the incorrectness of this by pointing out that the Potter’s Wheel was already well-known to Homer.

Again, on the other hand, Pliny’s assertion in his *Naturalis Historia*, VII. 56, that it should be attributed to Corœbus the Athenian, is altogether disproved by the fact (established by evidence afforded from sculptures of the period which have survived to the present time) that the wheel was known to the Egyptians in the earliest epochs of their history, previous to the arrival of Joseph (1728 B.C.), therefore nearly 200 years before even the foundation of Athens by Cecrops in 1556 B.C. Indeed, it was not at all an uncommon thing for the Greeks to adopt the discoveries of the Egyptian and other neighbouring countries ; and when the origin of any one of them was forgotten to claim it as their own invention.

The most probable solution of the matter seems to us to be that it may have been employed among the Assyrians, Babylonians, or Egyptians, or may even have been known to the builders of the Tower of Babel (2247 B.C.), in which case it will not seem strange that after the dispersion of the descendants of Noah, it should appear in several parts of the earth almost simultaneously.

That the Potter's Wheel was used by the Assyrians and Babylonians we have every proof in the tablets, cylinders, and polygonal prisms, on which were inscribed, or rather impressed, in cuneiform characters, the literary or historical records which they wished to preserve to posterity. These cylinders and prisms were undoubtedly formed on the Potter's Wheel, every one of them having a circular hole through the centre, the sides of which bear ring-like marks caused by the potter's thumb, as he scooped out the centre whilst the clay was in motion on the wheel.

As, however, we have been able to procure drawings of several ancient paintings from the tombs of Egypt, the processes of mixing, turning, and otherwise manipulating the clay being well represented on the monuments of Thebes and Beni Hassen, we shall content ourselves by describing its form and method of working in that country.

The first form of Potter's Wheel used in Egypt appears to have been a small circular table moving freely on a pivot in the centre, and propelled by hand.

Fig. I, copied from a painting on one of the tombs at Thebes, exhibits it in its simplest shape. We will suppose the clay to have been previously kneaded to a proper consistency with the feet, and ready for use. The potter, seated on his haunches, having placed his clay on the wheel gives it an occasional spin, which will cause it to revolve for some time without a fresh impulse, thus enabling him to use—at least, temporarily—both hands for his work.

This form of wheel was used by the Egyptians, as is abundantly proved by existing fragments of pottery, as early as 2500 B.C., and is still employed, without any alteration in structure, by the potters of many parts of India.

A later improvement of the above was introduced into Egypt under the Ptolemies, and consisted in the employment of the feet, instead of the hands, to propel the wheel. The body of the machine was built rather more than three feet in height, and turned in a framework. A small horizontal table or wheel was fixed on the top, and a second and larger one, about three or four feet in diameter, was fixed, also horizontally, near the foot or base. By means of this additional wheel the potter was able to sit well over his work, and keep the wheel in a continual motion and at a regular speed with his feet (see Fig. II.) ; at the same time he had both hands free for the manipulation of the clay.

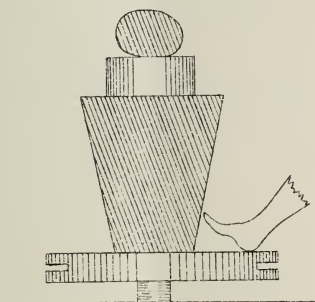
The Potter's Wheel was greatly used, more especially in the earliest times, as a means of applying

I.



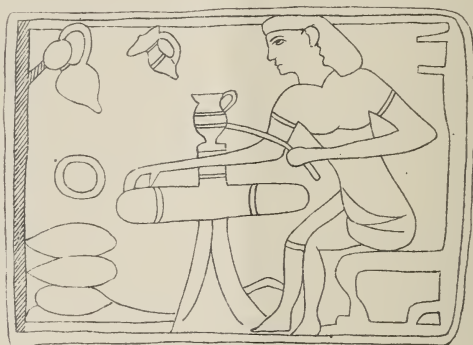
POTTERS MOULDING VESSELS ON HAND-WHEELS,
BENI-HASSEN.

II



POTTER'S WHEEL OF THE TIME OF THE PTOLEMIES,
MOVED BY FOOT FROM A WALL RELIEF AT PHILÆ.

III.



TABLET FROM CORINTH (FULL SIZE).
POTTER PAINTING BANDS WHILE THE VESSEL REVOLVES ON THE WHEEL

painted ornaments to the sides and rims of various wares. A favourite ornament consisted of a number of concentric and diminishing circles one within another, and was painted in the following manner. The vessel, after being well dried in the sun, was placed for a second time on the wheel, in any required position, either in its original upright position, or on its side. A centre having been formed, the brush containing paint (or in some cases a pair of compasses) was held against the place designed for the ornament, and, on the table being revolved, marked it out with broad or narrow bands as required. Fig. III, a votive tablet from Corinth (now in the Louvre), probably of about 700-600 B.C., shows a potter at work in his shop, painting bands in this way.

The wheel which, it will be noticed, he is turning with his right hand, while he applies the brush containing colour with his left, is of the earlier form, and without the lower pedal disc.

The wheel was also used in the manufacture of Samian ware to give the centre, whilst the yielding, unbaked substance forming the vessel was pressed into a mould of burnt clay. By this means the exterior decoration was formed, the interior being by the same means, and at the same time, turned perfectly smooth.

Although the potters of Egypt were a large class, and fictile art was held of sufficient importance to be portrayed on all the most important monuments of the country, yet it would seem to have been only followed

by persons of the lowest extraction. In "Birch's Ancient Pottery," p. 37, we read on this point, "Potters held a low position in Egypt, and the occupation was pursued by only servants and slaves."

Notwithstanding the apparent degradation which thus seems to have been attached to the calling of the potter, he served as a symbol of the highest attribute of at least two of the Egyptian deities; the same idea of a potter fashioning a vessel being also applied to the power of the god to create man's human form, and mould it as he would. Hence we find among the paintings of the Ptolemaic period representations of Pthah [the creative power] and Neph, or Knoum [the divine spirit], seated at the Potter's Wheel, moulding clay into the form of human beings.

There are few processes in any handicraft more beautiful and suggestive than that of a potter moulding a vessel on the wheel. The plastic clay answers to the most delicate touch of his hand without any apparent effort on his part, rising and falling, now a lordly vase, and again a lowly basin, at his unspoken will, his fingers forming it, and at the same time breathing into it his very life and thought. A learned writer has remarked on this subject, "the ease with which the potter manipulates the clay makes this art beautiful and striking beyond all others in which the desired form can only be attained by comparatively slow and laborious methods."

As poets and writers have many allusions to this trade, and have drawn their similes from the working

of the clay, we feel we cannot better conclude this meagre sketch than by quoting from two of the earliest, and nearest to the time of its birth. In Homer's *Iliad*, XVIII. 680 (of which we give Lord Derby's translation), we find the following, in which the poet compares a dance to the whirl of a Potter's Wheel :—

“ Now whirl'd they round with nimble, practised feet.
Easy as when a potter, seated, turns
A wheel, new fashioned by his skilful hands,
And spins it round, to see if true it run.”

Again, the rapid ease with which the potter forms, alters, and reforms, a vessel, provides a subject for several of the most forcible verses of the prophet Jeremiah, viz., ch. xviii, vers. 3–6 :—

3. Then I went down to the potter's house, and, behold, he wrought a work on the wheels.*

4. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter : so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it.

5. Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying,

6. O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the Lord. Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in Mine hand, O house of Israel.

* Jeremiah xviii. 3 : *Then I went down to the potter's house, and he wrought a work on the wheels.* The original word means *stones*, rather than wheels. Dr. Blayney, in a note on this passage, says : “ The appellation will appear very proper, if we consider this machine as consisting of a pair of circular stones placed one upon another like mill-stones, of which the lower was immovable, but the upper one turned upon the foot of a spindle or axis, and had motion communicated to it by the feet of the potter sitting at his work, as may be learned from *Ecclus.* xxxviii. 29. Upon the top of this upper stone, which was flat, the clay was placed, which the potter, having given the stone the due velocity, formed into shape with his hands.”—BURDER, “*Oriental Customs*,” 2nd edit., Vol. I., p. 194.

